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FBI warned of manipulation on nuclear issue

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WASHINGTON — Rep. Don Edwards, a former FBI agent whose subcommittee oversees the agency, warned yesterday that the FBI was in danger of being manipulated by the White House for political purposes.

Edwards contended in a letter to FBI Director William H. Webster that the FBI already has aligned itself improperly with the Reagan administration's opposition to a freeze on the production of nuclear weapons.

The congressman noted that one day after President Reagan told a news conference last week that Soviet agents were manipulating the U.S. nuclear-freeze movement, a top FBI official said publicly that the FBI had furnished such information to the White House.

The official, Roger Young, assistant director of the FBI for congressional and public affairs, said Reagan had been "accurate" in describing "the Soviet attempts to influence the peace movement."

"We are not casting aspersions on the peace movement," Young said, "but we know the Soviets have targeted it as the place to exert influence, not just in the United States, but in other parts of the world."

By making such a public statement, Edwards contended, the FBI had broken its own guidelines requiring that investigations be kept secret until criminal charges are filed so that both the investigations and the reputations of innocent people are protected.

"It is particularly unseemly for the FBI to appear to be taking sides by providing secret file information to one side of the [nuclear-freeze] debate," especially when the "reliability of the faceless, nameless informers providing the information" is unknown, wrote Edwards, a Democrat from California.

He urged Webster either to admit a mistake or to explain the FBI's role to the public or to the House Judiciary Committee's subcommittee on civil and constitutional rights, which Edwards heads.

Webster said earlier this week that the FBI had furnished secret information on foreign influence in the nuclear-freeze movement to the National Security Council and to the House Select Committee on Intelligence. In an interview Wednesday, Young said the information had been requested by someone working for the council and had been sent to the White House in early October.

The FBI director said earlier this week that "the Soviets have engaged in what is called 'active measures' by which they seek to bring about a psychological effect on various movements that are consistent with [their] overall world objectives and strategies — and this [the nuclear-freeze movement] is no exception."

"That should not in any way cast a reflection upon the sincere, dedicated and informed citizens who for other reasons are supporting this or any other movement in the exercise of their First Amendment rights."

An FBI official said all of the information furnished to the administration and Congress came from FBI counterintelligence, not from ~~any~~ surveillance of domestic groups

"and we haven't violated any of our guidelines."

In his letter, Edwards recalled how President Lyndon B. Johnson, confronted with widespread public dissent over the Vietnam War in the 1960s, used the FBI to investigate communist influence in the anti-war movement.

"We know now how regrettable the FBI's statements and actions were with respect to both the civil rights and anti-war movements," Edwards wrote. "Let us learn from history and not repeat our mistakes."

In an interview, he added:

"I'm sure Marxists and Socialists are in the peace movement, but it's nonsense to say it's manipulated. It's bigger than that." Referring to the denunciation of nuclear war being drafted by the nation's Roman Catholic bishops, Edwards remarked: "They're [Soviet agents] not at the downtown Hilton manipulating those bishops. I'll tell you."

Edwards suggested that possible political targets in the administration's criticism of the freeze movement could be Democratic presidential candidates who favor a freeze, especially Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D., Mass.) and former Vice President Walter F. Mondale.